DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 890 CS 509 030

AUTHOR Soukup, Paul A.
TITLE Novels, Scripts, and Natural Discourse: Mediated Models of Language Use and Understanding.
PUB DATE 22 Nov 94
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (80th, New Orleans, LA, November 19-22, 1994).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication Research; Discourse Analysis; *Hermeneutics; Language Research; *Language Role; *Language Usage; Models; Multimedia Materials; Novels; Scripts
IDENTIFIERS *Communication Context; *Discourse; Gadamer (Hans Georg); Hirsch (E D); Interpretive Communities; Text Factors

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the question of interpreting complex texts, particularly scripts and multimedia presentations. The paper first reviews the literature on natural discourse, noting that although interpreting spoken natural language seems rather straightforward, many scholars have discussed what is required to make sense of discourse. The paper next discusses the discourse of novels, pointing out that writing and print fix language to a page and, in doing so, change an individual's relationship to language, and that the written text does not engage people in the same ways that natural discourse does. The paper cites the rise of hermeneutics, or textual interpretation, and notes that modern scholarship has subjected hermeneutics itself to a struggle for understanding, with outstanding scholars such as E. D. Hirsch and Hans-Georg Gadamer in opposing theoretical camps. The paper then discusses in detail the discourse of scripts, after defining them as "a set of instructions for actors so that they can recreate a human lifeworld." The paper concludes with a postscript about multimedia presentations, which cross the boundaries separating natural discourse, texts, and scripts. The paper concludes that the situation of multimedia throws all interpretation into relief and suggests the fusion of not just two, but multiple horizons. (Contains 23 references.) (NKA)

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Novels, Scripts, and Natural Discourse: Mediated Models of Language Use and Understanding

This paper explores the question of interpreting complex texts, particularly scripts and multimedia presentations. After reviewing hermeneutic theory as applied to natural discourse and to printed materials, it suggests that interpreting scripts requires the simultaneous fusion of not just two, but multiple horizons.

Paper presented at the 80th Annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, November 22, 1994, New Orleans, Louisiana

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Paul A. Soukup, SJ
Communication Department
Santa Clara University
Santa Clara, CA 95053
408-554-4022
fax: 408-554-4913

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Novels, Scripts, and Natural Discourse:
Mediated Models of Language Use and Understanding

The Greek god Hermes, the patron and guardian of translation—after whom we name the discipline hermeneutics—is a trickster. He is god of crossroads as well, and fittingly, since people meet at crossings, since conversation happens at crossings, and since conversation itself is a crossing. Language becomes the natural sphere for Hermes: language and communication. And no one can deny that these are tricky indeed.

The farther we stand away from language in use, the harder we find the task of interpretation. Written texts seem more difficult than face-to-face interaction; scripted and performed texts more difficult still; and, it seems, multimedia hypertexts most difficult of all. Multiply the crossings—multiply the occasions for Hermes to enter—and we multiply the tricks we subject ourselves to. This paper sets out to explore some aspects of interpretation: to discover the crossings and to hunt for Hermes.

Another way to put this is to ask how we envision language. The closer it is to discourse, the easier the hermeneutic task. But today we do not hear language; we "see" it. One of the inevitable consequences of literacy is that we naturally assume a visible form to language. By doing that, we tend to bring all the hermeneutic tools developed for texts to bear on other forms of language as well.

In this sense, at least, the form we give our language in turn influences how we react to language, how we use language, and how we will interpret language.

I. Natural Discourse

On the surface, interpreting spoken natural language seems rather straightforward: People converse; when something said confuses a person, the listener can pose a question. This certainly describes the traditional position, one enunciated as long ago as Plato's time, when in his Seventh Letter (1932), he complained that writing lacked this immediacy of explanation. Contemporary discourse analysis expands and sheds light on this position. For example, both Aaron Cicourel and H. P. Grice supply a theoretical base for "what conversationalists know" (McLaughlin, 1984, pp. 29-33).

Cicourel, a sociologist, describes a set of rules or "interpretive procedures" that apply not only to conversation but to all human interaction. These describe the assumptions people typically make in order to establish a "common scheme of reference" (1974, p. 34): reciprocal perspectives, indexicality of language, temporary suspension of judgment pending clarification of uncertain terms, and normal forms. Each of Cicourel's rules presumes that people *want* to understand one another (pp. 34-41).

Grice, from the perspective of analytic philosophy, takes a similar approach to communicative exchange. Conversationalists seek meaning; speakers actually

construct utterances to "implicate" a meaning. "The term *implicate* is used rather than *imply* to remind us that the process does not necessarily follow the rules of formal logic" (Nofsinger, 1991, p. 35). Grice then expresses the basis of interpreting conversation in a series of maxims. The Cooperative Principle, which instructs interlocutors to contribute to conversations in appropriate and expected ways, forms the foundation for all the rest. The Quantity Maxim tells conversationalists to contribute neither more nor less information than required. The Quality Maxim instructs them to contribute only that which they believe to be true. The Relevancy Maxim requires that contributions relate to the topic. And the Manner Maxim tells them to speak in clear, organized, and unambiguous language (Grice, 1975).

Jacobs (1994) develops these points by highlighting the trickier parts of conversation. Not only is there a problem of meaning; there are also problems of action and of coherence. As Austin (1962) and later Searle (1969) made clear, discourse does more than describe states of affairs or events; it accomplishes things ("I bet you $10" does indeed constitute a wager.) Even beyond this, natural language users somehow keep track of how discourse fits together, even in a late-night meandering discussion of the problems of the world.

What then is required to make sense of discourse? Jacobs suggests five properties present in natural language discourse. First, "linguistic communication requires shared principles for inference beyond information given by a 'surface'

reading" (p. 203). Like Cicourel, he suggests that people must bring additional knowledge to their talk. Another way to put this would be to note that we go through a kind of sorting of possible meanings, choosing the most likely. Discourse presumes a hermeneutics of recovery, with both parties working to make sense of the talk in the shortest period of time. The very pace of naturally occurring conversation does not allow for suspicion.

Second, "linguistic communication requires generative principles" (p. 204). People create talk and can express the same meaning in literally dozens or hundreds of ways: some stylized, some original. Jacobs implies that listeners simultaneously use these same generative principles to understand. To enable this, cooperation among communicators seems the rule.

Third, "communicative meaning is context determined" (p. 205). People take cues from the language itself, from the situation, and from their surroundings in order to select a meaning from the range of possible meanings. From a fairly early age, we are conscious of the need to attend to linguistic context as a guide to word meaning. Although we seem less conscious of the fact, we also draw on situational knowledge as a guide to linguistic context: For example, saying, "I do," in a church setting differs from saying "I do," in a play. Similarly and usually unconsciously, we draw on conversational surroundings—especially nonverbal actions—to further reduce linguistic ambiguities. The unconscious nature of the latter two contexts can lead to problems in face-to-face

communication, as Watzlawick, Bevan, and Jackson pointed out some years ago (1967). Interpersonal communication, in their terms, requires both "analogue" (nonverbal) and "digital" (linguistic) elements.

Fourth, "language structures are functional designs" (Jacobs, 1994, p. 206). Because discourse enacts more than meaning, it allows all manner of indirect activity or shortcuts. The functions of language suggest which structural patterns interlocutors should use to understand each other. The two intersect, creating their own crossroads within the discourse itself. Humor, for example, works because it exploits these crossings. To answer a question with, "Is the Pope Catholic?" indirectly answers the question while at the same time making the questioner work at the irony. Even in such complicated exchange, the speaker implicates a meaning—precisely so that the hearer can retrieve it.

Fifth, "language use is multifunctional" (p. 207). In practice, in daily conversation, language accomplishes many things. "All utterances, for example, participate in procedural and ritual orders, convey both topical and relational information, an contribute to varying aspects of discourse coherence" (p. 207). Both enacting (encoding) and understanding (decoding) utterances demand the recognition of this variety. To participate in a conversation means that the communicators "know" how to rapidly weigh the functional options and determine the most likely meaning. The requirements of conversational implicature further

demand that the speaker aid the listener by providing enough cues for the conversation to proceed smoothly.

These five properties describe a minimum condition for discourse, but do not in themselves provide a model for language use or understanding—which Jacobs does try to summarize as an "inferential/strategic model" (pp. 221-224), but which lies beyond my interest here. These properties do indicate a hermeneutic presupposition: The nature of natural language discourse requires that interlocutors make every effort to help each other. Language may not be as simple as Plato thought it, but people act to simplify it wherever possible. Hermes the translator appears as often as Hermes the trickster.

Despite its complexity, natural language discourse offers rapid understanding or decoding. Because sound is fleeting, because it does not exist beyond its moment of creation, it must contain enough cues for understanding (Ong, 1990). It must, of necessity, foster a hermeneutics of recovery.

But does not a hermeneutics of suspicion enter the picture? Have we not learned anything from psychoanalysis, structuralism, and deconstruction? Yes, we do know that even spoken language can mask its meanings; it can reveal more than it intends; it can trick us, lull us, deceive us. But these things are lessons learned from literacy.

II. Novels

The novel might be any text. Though the term, "novel," generally refers to a particular kind of fictive story, all writing shares in the quality of the novel because all writing demands a series of fictions (Ong, 1975): a fiction of audience (who will read this anyway?), a fiction of context (how does this relate to speech or to other writing?), and a fiction of re-creation (how do I, the reader, make sense of this?). Thus, in its attempt to mimic natural discourse, the novel sheds light on what happens in interpreting texts. To better see this, we must begin with literacy.

With literacy comes the ability to lend stability to language. Writing and print fix language to a page and, in doing so, change our relationship to language. Words, as Plato noted, lie helpless on the page. They cannot answer our questions.

> Plato's Socrates complains, a written text is basically unresponsive. If you ask a person to explain his or her statement, you can get an explanation; if you ask a text, you get nothing except the same, often stupid, words that called for your question in the first place. (Ong, 1985, p. 3)

More than that, the written text does not engage us as in the same ways that natural discourse does.

> In keeping with the agonistic mentality of oral cultures, their tendency to view everything in terms of interpersonal struggle, Plato's Socrates also holds it against writing that the written word cannot defend itself as the natural spoken word can: Real speech and thought always exist essentially in the context of struggle. Writing is passive, out of it, in an unreal, unnatural world. (Ong, 1985, p. 3)

But the positioning of words on a page invites us to relate to the words themselves as other—something that seldom occurs to interlocutors in natural discourse. We attend to words and, in doing so, question the words, interrogate the words, treat them like we would a living partner.

This is both a weakness and a strength for the written word. In writing we try to mimic natural discourse, giving it a permanence that it would otherwise not have. But that comes at a cost.

> The condition of words in a text is quite different from the condition in spoken discourse. Although they refer to sounds and are meaningless unless they can be related—externally or in the imagination—to the sounds or, more precisely, the phonemes they encode, written words are isolated from the fuller context in which spoken words come into being. The word in its natural, oral habitat is a part of a full, real, existential situation that is more than merely verbal, part of a plenum. Spoken words never occur alone, in a

> context simply of words. It is not good for words to be alone, one might say. (Ong, 1985, p. 7)

By depriving the written word of its oral surroundings, we make the task of the reader (and the writer) more difficult. Grice's "implicature" becomes problematic because we lack responsibility to a living interlocutor. Novels and written texts ask us to make explicit the means we use to guide our interpretation.

But there is a strength in this, too. Written texts gain a permanence in space and time: One need not be in the same place to interact with the author of a text. One need not live at the same time—the author may be long dead and still engage us. Written texts allow scrutiny: they remain still and uncomplaining beneath the x-ray or knife of critical apparatus. In fact, written texts invite a variety of responses and give us the luxury of reflection: We need not respond at once. Where a speaker, perhaps impatiently, awaits our reply, the text is content to lie on the page, perhaps for years. That quality alone sets the text apart: It engages us as nothing else can. The same luxury applies to the writer as well—no hurry to create an utterance, for the surface of writing waits. One can also go back over the text, refining it, adjusting it, clarifying it (or making it more obscure). One can explore the world of textuality and intertextuality.

The written texts cultivates in us an interpretive attitude. We experience it as a thing, as an object less than as a personal utterance. Because it lies still before us and engages us, we treat it with a simultaneous reverence and suspicion.

With an existence and a "voice" of its own, it deserves our respect. But by intention or illusion or simple mistake, it can deceive us; and so—like the traveller in a crowded station—we keep our hand on our wallet and eye it carefully.

Thus, the novel provides yet another gift to its users. It makes us specify our hermeneutic tools. What happens when we read texts? Because of the distancing between author and reader, the reader must create (or re-create) conditions for understanding, what Jacobs (1994) described as the properties present in natural language discourse. Just how this occurs and just what constitutes this process fall under the patronage of the trickster/translator, Hermes: hermeneutics.

As one might expect with a trickster present, hermeneutics is neither straightforward nor easy. In fact, modern scholarship has subjected hermeneutics itself to a struggle for understanding. Richard Palmer (1969) describes six competing definitions of hermeneutics (p. 33), dividing roughly into two camps: the specification of methodological tools and "the philosophical exploration of the character and requisite conditions for all understanding" (p. 46). The former camp has a champion in E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (1967) and the latter in Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1975). Complicating things further and creating a (sometimes) crossroads between the two camps, Paul Ricoeur has noted a two-fold cross-purpose in hermeneutics: the recovery of meaning and the destruction of the illusion of meaning that lies on the surface of texts (Palmer, pp. 43-45). The work of Biblical

and literary scholars usually exemplify the former while individuals like Freud, Nietzsche, and Derrida model the latter.

Hirsch, who usually opts for the recovery of an author's meaning, summarizes some of the methodological tools of interpretation. Language, with its grammar and semantic rules, provides a first and second guide; genre, the classification of discourses, a third; and the community of interpreters, a fourth.

> To establish a reading as probable it is first necessary to show, with reference to the norms of language, that it is possible. This is the criterion of *legitimacy*: the reading must be permissible within the public norms of the *langue* in which the text was composed. The second criterion is that of *correspondence*: the reading must account for each linguistic component in the text.... The third criterion is that of *generic appropriateness*: if the text follows the conventions of a scientific essay, for example, it is inappropriate to construe the kind of allusive meaning found in casual conversation. When these three preliminary criteria have been satisfied, there remains a fourth criterion which gives significance to all the rest, the criterion of plausibility or *coherence*. (Hirsch, 1967, p. 236)

For Hirsch, coherence positions the text with the context of past meanings and expected meanings. Although he himself does not explore the direction, his same criteria can guide a suspicion or deconstruction of the text.

Gadamer's approach differs greatly from Hirsch's, primarily because he connects interpretation with the ways human beings inhabit the world. Following Heidegger, he argues that "we understand a given text, matter, or situation, not with an empty consciousness temporarily filled with the present situation but rather because we hold in our understanding, and bring into play a preliminary intention with regards to the situation, an already established way of seeing, and certain ideational 'preconceptions'" (Palmer, 1969, p. 176). Interpreting or understanding is a way of being in the world and involves, in Gadamer's phrase, the fusion of our horizon with that of the matter to be interpreted.

To demonstrate this process, Gadamer examines three areas of understanding and interpretation: aesthetics, the human sciences (where his models are history and jurisprudence), and language. He argues, for example, that historical understanding requires (1) that we ourselves have a horizon which allows us to situate ourselves in our present, and (2) that we encounter the horizon of the past which situates it precisely as past. "Horizon" here is used in the sense of the visual metaphor—that which lies at a distance and provides a background for seeing and comprehending what lies at hand. Gadamer notes that a horizon of a particular present is constituted by the prejudices or pre-judgments we bring with us.

> In fact the horizon of the present is being continually formed, in that we have continually to test all our prejudices. An important part of

> this testing is the encounter with the past and the understanding of the tradition from which we come. Hence the horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. There is no more an isolated horizon of the present than there are historical horizons. Understanding, rather, is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves. We know the power of this kind of fusion chiefly from earlier times and their naive attitude to themselves and their origin. In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new continually grow together to make something of living value, without either being explicitly distinguished from the other. (1960/1975, p. 273)

Ultimately, for Gadamer, the process becomes dialogical: The interpreter and the text engage each other in such a way that their respective horizons of understanding merge. From the two comes one conversation.

Interestingly, Gadamer returns the interpretation of texts to its foundation in language and discourse. Texts, despite their appearance, do not have existence independent of the speaking community. As Ong points out, "for a text to be intelligible, to deliver its message, it must be reconverted into sound, directly or indirectly, either really in the external world or in the auditory imagination" (1985, p. 5). And so, Gadamer clearly describes the stance we take towards texts, whether we wish to recover their meaning or to strip away their illusion. We and

the text are ineluctably linked. We learn how we stand in the world by making the world stand still before us, by stopping the flow of discourse, by freezing it in print.

From all this, we can see that the novel (the written text that records discourse) helps reveal discourse for what it is. The analysis of discourse in Part I depends on literacy—for it is literacy that makes discourse act like a text and invites the application of hermeneutic tools to discourse itself. Indeed, we have become so accustomed to visualizing language that we more readily see it than hear it: Discourse analysis would not exist without transcriptions. And it is discourse-as-literal-text that allowed the discovery of hermeneutic tools.

III. Scripts

Language representation goes beyond the printed word: Scripts describe a set of instructions for actors so that they can re-create a human lifeworld. This kind of text mimics natural discourse even more specifically than novels do. While playwrights have created such representations of human interaction for millennia, we experience an even more convincing illusions of human life with the advent of film and electronic media. And the form of language becomes more curious still.

Actors perform a discourse that lacks the full and usual characteristics of discourse because actors perform written representations of discourse. Their discourse does have dialogic form; it does contain many of the features Jacobs lists

as characteristics of talk. But it lacks spontaneity; it lacks the uncertainty of implicature on the fly. Instead, it is smooth, seamless, quick. The process of writing interposes its step and its characteristics—not only do the actors speak words not their own but they speak words chosen and polished and re-written. They perform a text.

Ong has termed the characteristics of such performed writing "secondary orality" (1971, p. 285). He describes it in some detail, contrasting it with primary orality—the discourse of non-literate cultures.

> At the same time, with telephone, radio, television, and various kinds of sound tape, electronic technology has brought us into the age of "secondary orality." This new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas.... But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well. (1982, p. 136)

Secondary orality is controlled by print. And that makes scripts different from both natural language discourse and novels.

Scripts (and the performances based on them) then pose their own problems of interpretation. Commenting on Ong's notion of secondary orality, Bruce

Gronbeck noted, "Here is a hermeneutic understanding of mediation, one wherein the past is re-presented albeit in determinatively altered forms in current practice" (1991, p. 16). Hermes, the trickster takes the stage again: Past cultural forms intersect modern ones; discourse passes through print; people represent themselves after studying their own images; and so on it goes, crossing and re-crossing. Because scripts mediate discourse, the interpretation of scripts will involve the aspects of hermeneutics that apply to both natural language discourse and to texts. It will also involve more.

Gadamer argues that interpretation consists of a fusion of horizons: that of the text and that of the interpreter. While this does apply to scripts in some ways, it does not really do justice to our experience. Without abandoning Gadamer's metaphor of horizon, I propose that comprehending scripts requires the fusion not of two but of at least five horizons: the horizons of the performed script itself, the horizon of the community or culture within which the script was created, the horizon of the viewer/hearer, the horizon of the local culture within which the script is experienced, and the horizon of the media of performance. In addition, one may wish to add yet another horizon: that of the actors performing the script.

Let us briefly look at each of these in turn. First, the horizon of the script or text: This most closely resembles Gadamer's horizon of the past. This horizon is the horizon of the other, the author(s). We allow the other to interrogate us at

the same time in which we interrogate the other. All of the tools proposed for textual analysis apply at this point. Here, too, Hirsch's approach using criteria of language, genre, and coherence seems apt.

Second, a script exists within a particular community that creates it and sustains its form. This may be a writers' workshop, a Hollywood studio, or any other "production community." Certainly, recent study of the production process indicates the role of producers and others on the development of programming. Staiger (1985) traces some of these communal influences in her examination of the classic Hollywood mode of production, noting elements as varied as the labor force itself, financing of films, and the role of standardization. Newcomb and Alley (1983) have provided a similar glimpse into the community of television as a producer's medium.

Third comes the horizon of the reader/viewer/hearer. Many factors have relevance here: a person's age, interests, past history, familiarity with the scripted material, as well as the person's experience of various means of communication. Regarding that last point, we can note that a person who has little experience of written texts will react differently to a performed text than will a highly literate person; similarly, a person with little or no exposure to visual images in film or video will react differently to a visually presented story than would a sophisticated viewer. Gadamer refers to all these factors collectively as the "pre-judgments" each of us brings to the text (1960/1975, pp. 235-273).

Fourth, the local culture also places a horizon in which people experience scripts. While this might merely be a specification of the former point, it is helpful to separate it since viewing conditions, instruction in media use, and communities of interpretation do have independent existences. For example, Lull's collection of case studies (1988) demonstrates both the variety and strength of family culture in influencing the interpretation of television. Similarly, Brown shows the existence of a "feminist culturalist television criticism" (1990, p. 12) in which the group's horizon situates that of the individual reader/viewer/hearer.

Finally, the medium itself places a horizon. Innis, McLuhan, Ong, and others have long noted that the form of presentation does have an effect on the content. Neil Postman's observation still provides a good illustration:

> Most Americans, including preachers, have difficulty accepting the truth, if they think about it at all, that not all forms of discourse can be converted from one medium to another. It is naive to suppose that something that has been expressed in one form can be expressed in another without significantly changing its meaning, texture or value. Much prose translates fairly well from one language to another, but we know that poetry does not.... To take another example: we may find it convenient to send a condolence card to a bereaved friend, but we delude ourselves if we believe that our card conveys the same

> meaning as our broken and whispered words when we are present.
>
> (1985, p. 117)

And so, the media forms themselves have their proper horizons or--to again use Gadamer's other term—prejudices. For example, American television has over the years developed a syntax and semantics to convey drama, comedy, suspense, and so forth. But other meaningful combinations are possible; to interpret without investigating those alternate forms may lead to a lack of understanding, not of the text but of the visual form.

In addition, the history of visual media in the United States (primarily film and video) has prepared audiences for all kinds of shorthand references; think, for example, of how the film version of "The Untouchables" paid visual homage to Eisenstein's Odessa Steps sequence from "The Battleship Potemkin." As viewers we have unconsciously appropriated thousands of images and quickly attribute meaning to those images. Viewers from other cultures or geographic areas may not as readily identify with the images or with the intended meanings.

Each of these areas crosses over the others, making scripts complicated to interpret and understand. The facts that scripts—like texts—remain at a distance even when performed and that scripts—unlike texts—realistically simulate natural discourse simply adds to the hermeneutic work. The wonder is that people move so quickly through this mediated world. Like discourse, the conventions (or rules) of the medium help the reader/viewer/hearer to navigate the

crossroads. Like texts, the scripts can be replayed, stopped, examined, interrogated.

IV. A Multimedia Postscript

Multimedia presentations offer new challenges for interpretation, primarily because they cross the boundaries separating natural discourse, texts, and scripts. They bear resemblances to each of the others. Like scripts, they describe performances and can even incorporate actors performing scripts (through video or audio tracks). Like texts, they consist of writing, with all of its distanciating and self-reflective forms. Like natural discourse, they act like dialogue partners, responding to the initiative of the multimedia user.

This last aspect proves the most interesting from the standpoint of interpretation. In order to give the illusion of response—and it is an illusion, since the "responses" are both scripted and limited—the texts are programmed. Yes, they do prove more flexible than other texts. Yes, they do allow the user to choose options. But the flexibility and options pale in comparison with discourse. Multimedia hypertexts introduce a greater measure of uncertainty than texts and scripts. But they do not approach the uncertainty of natural discourse because their generative principles are necessarily more limited than those of language.

However, this ability to move through the text, even in a programmed way, raises new issues of implicature. Grice had noted how conversationalists work to

help each other understand by observing a series of maxims. While writers and programmers may do the same, the relative freedom of the multimedia user to jump through the text cancels out some of the more accessible rules for interpretation and negates the impact of some maxims. Through the combination of finite responses and distanciation, multimedia tends to foster its own deconstruction. Its predispositions work against itself: Either it guides interpretation too much or it becomes almost incomprehensible.

And so, the situation of multimedia throws all interpretation into relief. Conversationalists and writers choose to ally themselves with Hermes, the translator: They wish a hermeneutics of recovery. The more they can do to assist interpretation the better. Readers and those who work with scripts find Hermes the trickster better company: They wish to discover hidden meanings, rhetorical devices, and the odd bit of deceit through a hermeneutics of suspicion. In the end, both must cooperate or the possibility of communication fades.

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